In celebration of the US independence day, we're dusting off this oldie but goodie about George Washington, and his usage of what we now call "OPSEC"

Arguably, no President in history has received a legendary status equal to George Washington. His reputation as a gifted military leader stems partially from his unique perspective as the leader of counterinsurgency forces (as a young officer in the Seven Year´s War) and as the leader of an insurgent army (in the Revolutionary War).

Within OPSEC circles, Washington is often quoted as saying, "Even minutiae should have a place in our collection, for things of a seemingly trifling nature, when enjoined with others of a more serious cast, may lead to valuable conclusion." While this is certainly true you must understand that this is a lesson our first president learned through bitter, near fatal experience.

Washington´s first experience with OPSEC (a term not used at the time, but the principles remain the same) came at the age of 21 when he was a young officer in the Seven Year´s War under British General Braddock. The effective French intelligence network (no doubt enabled by ineffective security) was able to ascertain Braddock´s moves well in advance and successfully ambushed the combined British and Colonial forces on their first expedition. In this attack, the combined forces lost 615 of their officers and 914 soldiers; in addition General Braddock was mortally wounded and barely escaped with the aid of Washington. Before his death four days later, Braddock gave Washington his ceremonial sash, one of the two reminders of this lesson that would stay with him forever.

If this hard lesson taught Washington one thing, it was the necessity of effective intelligence, as well as that of secrecy. He was later quoted as saying, "(U)pon Secrecy, Success depends in Most Enterprises…and for want of it, they are generally defeated."

With this philosophy, Washington would establish and lead an effective spy network during the Revolutionary War. These spies would operate, at times, directly with or under British forces and would provide Washington with critical military information regarding British plans, strategies and objectives. In order to evade detection, all agents would memorize and refer only to code names (for instance, George Washington was only referred to as "711" and New York was "727"), which demonstrates a clear understanding of the importance of obfuscating key names and locations. Using the same scheme for names and locations also helped to hide their true meaning. In addition, the use of secret codes, invisible ink and encryption demonstrated Washington´s awareness of the necessity of not only attempting to avoid the capture of information, but also to prevent the use of information should capture occur.

Unfortunately, this valuable lesson seemed to be forgotten when Washington sent a seemingly harmless letter to his dentist in Philadelphia asking for denture wires and a cleaning tool. In and of itself, this letter provided no military intelligence of value when it and other messages were captured by the British. However, some of the other messages indicated a potential attack on New York. Sir Henry Clinton, then chief of the British Army, was skeptical. The letters almost seemed too good to be true especially when you understand that Washington´s skill in military deception was known by the enemy. Clinton was left to wonder of the validity and value of the "intelligence." However, Clinton correctly reasoned that this letter would most likely not have been included in a package was to be intentionally "captured" and surmised that the captured intelligence was legitimate. Clinton was able to strengthen his forces in New York, prompting Washington to abandon that campaign.

This setback did not discourage Washington from continuing to use deception and disinformation however. This lesson learned became a very effective strategy to fabricate documents to be "captured", or to instruct agents to discuss certain matters in areas that British soldiers or spies were able to overhear, or even to intercept messages meant for British forces and alter them before passing them along seemingly unchanged. For example: When Washington had his army outside of Philadelphia he instructed his

procurement officers make sizable purchases of supplies, and even constructed fake military facilities, which convinced the British that his 3,000-strong army contained 40,000 men.

Throughout the war, Washington relied heavily on espionage and intelligence. The Culper Spy Ring, headed by Major Benjamin Talmadge (under the pseudonym "John Bolton") learned that the British had plans to attack an allied French expedition in Rhode Island (it is not clear how British Forces learned of the landing). Washington responded by planting false intelligence with British agents indicating that he intended to move against New York City. In response, the British Commander held his forces at New York, which had the additional benefit of masking Washington´s movement towards Chesapeake Bay and Yorktown. It was imperative that Washington´s forces practice good OPSEC in order to avoid detection of this grand deception.

Washington understood the importance of educating those under him about what we´ve come to call OPSEC. In a clear early understanding of what we now know as the OPSEC process, Washington wrote to thank James Lovell for a piece of intelligence, saying, "it is by comparing a variety of information, we are frequently enabled to investigate facts, which were so intricate or hidden, that no single clue could have led to the knowledge of them. . . intelligence becomes interesting which but from its connection and collateral circumstances, would not be important." He also spoke to General Rufus Putnam in August 1777 about calculating an adversary´s strength, saying, "Deserters and people of that class always speak of number. . . indeed, scarce any person can form a judgment unless he sees the troops paraded and can count the divisions. But, if you can by any means obtain a list of the regiments left upon the island, we can compute the number of men within a few hundreds, over or under." This "training" prompted Federalist William Duer to write, "To say more in a Letter, might be imprudent" when discussing a matter of potential value.

Similarly, to the credit of the Continental Congress, the first secrecy agreement was adopted for government employees. It read, in part, "I do solemnly swear, that I will not directly or indirectly divulge any manner or thing which shall come to my knowledge as (clerk, secretary) of the board of War and Ordnance for the United Colonies. . . So help me God."

Perhaps the best example of OPSEC in Washington´s strategy was in the attack on Stony Point. Stony Point was an ominous British fort on the Hudson River, with walls 150 feet high, water on three sides and a swamp on the fourth, and an imposing garrison of 500 men and many cannons. Colonel Wayne was convinced that it could be taken, and eventually convinced Washington that it could be done. Washington approved the plan with the advice, "That is should be attempted by the Light Infantry only, which should march under cover of the night and with the utmost secrecy to the enemy's lines, securing every person they find to prevent discovery". Note especially the use of darkness to mask movement and the securing of potential witnesses/agents. Because of this secrecy, the surprise attack was a success resulting in only 15 American deaths versus 63 British.

Clearly, George Washington effectively led the newly formed army to victory not only because of excellent military tactics, but also because a solid understanding of OPSEC. If OPSEC can help General Washington win a war then who are we to deny its use today to protect our sensitive information?